

Nato changes codes after spy scare

By DAVID SHEARS in Bonn

NATO hurriedly changed its secret codes at Easter as a German naval commander in a Rhineland defence communications centre was being questioned on suspicion of espionage, it was reliably learned yesterday.

The commander is said by authoritative sources to have had access not merely to codes but to the even more sensitive system whereby the code-machine settings are changed at frequent intervals.

One well-placed official said this was regarded by Nato as the most damaging potential breach of Allied security since the case of Günter Guillaume, ex-Chancellor Brandt's former assistant, whose arrest as a suspected spy led to Herr Brandt's downfall last May.

Police began questioning the commander on Good Friday, a spokesman of the German Federal Public Prosecutor's office said in Karlsruhe.

"But the investigation has not yet provided solid grounds for suspicion," he added.

No arrest

For this reason the commander had not been arrested and the spokesman refused to give his name for publication. The officer has been "moved to other work."

The Bonn Defence Ministry declined to discuss the case in detail, referring questions to legal authorities in Karlsruhe.

German military sources said that the Bundeswehr (armed forces) Communications Office,

where the commander worked, was a centre for "all forms of defence communication."

The communications centre is at Ahrweiler, about 20 miles south-west of Bonn, close to the emergency underground headquarters that would be used by the West German Government in time of crisis.

It is understood that the centre is engaged in drawing up sophisticated code systems for Nato communications.

Nato officials fear is that the German officer might have betrayed this super-sensitive technology to the Communist bloc. Hence the acute anxiety and the swift attempt to plug any leakage of secrets.

For a long time, America and other allies have been worried by weaknesses of West German security. The Guillaume case was only one example.

German observers speculate that the decision not to hold the commander in detention could partly be due to a desire to play the incident down while pursuing other possible spy ring contacts without a blaze of publicity.

So far, the affair has almost entirely escaped notice in the German Press. But it is assumed that even though the commander is still at liberty he is under surveillance.